

Britain's prehistory,

Britain has not always been an island. It became one only after the end of the last ice age. The temperature rose and the ice cap melted, flooding the lower-lying land that is now under the North Sea and the English Channel.

The Ice Age was not just one long equally cold period. There were warmer times when the ice cap retreated, and colder periods when the ice cap reached as far south as the River Thames. Our first evidence of human life is a few stone tools, dating from one of the warmer periods, about 250000 Before Christ. These simple objects show that there were two different kinds of inhabitant. The earlier group made their tools from flakes of flint, similar in kind to stone tools found across the north European plain as far as Russia.

The other group made tools from a central core of flint, probably the earliest method of human tool making, which spread from Africa to Europe. Hand axes made in this way have been found widely, as far north as Yorkshire and as far west as Wales.

However, the ice advanced again and Britain became hardly habitable until another milder period, probably around 50000 Before Christ. During this time a new type of human being seems to have arrived, who was the ancestor of the modern British. These people looked similar to the modern British, but were probably smaller and had a life span of only about thirty years.

Around 10000 Before Christ, as the Ice Age drew to a close, Britain was peopled by small groups of hunters, gatherers and fishers. Few had settled homes, and they seemed to have followed herds of deer which provided them with food and clothing. By about 5000 Before Christ Britain had finally become an island, and had also become heavily forested. For the wanderer—hunter culture this was a disaster, for the cold-loving deer and other animals on which they lived largely died out.

About 3000 Before Christ Neolithic (or New Stone Age) people crossed the narrow sea from Europe in small round boats of bent wood covered with animal skins. Each could carry one or two persons. These people kept animals and grew corn crops, and knew how to make pottery. They probably came from either the Iberian (Spanish) peninsula or even the North African coast. They were small, dark, and long-headed people, and may be the forefathers of dark-haired inhabitants of Wales and Cornwall today. They settled in the western parts of Britain and Ireland, from Cornwall at the southwest end of Britain all the way to the far north.

These were the first of several waves of invaders before the first arrival of the Romans in 55 Before Christ. It used to be thought that these waves of invaders marked fresh stages in British development. However, although they must have brought new ideas and methods, it is now thought that the changing pattern of Britain's prehistory was the result of local economic and social forces.

The great "public works" of this time, which needed a huge organisation of labour, tell us a little of how prehistoric Britain was developing. The earlier of these works were great "barrows", or burial mounds, made of earth or stone. Most of these barrows are found on the chalk uplands of south Britain. Today these uplands have poor soil and few trees, but they were not like that then. They were airy woodlands that could easily be cleared for farming, and as a result were the most easily habitable part of the countryside.

Eventually, and over a very long period, these areas became overfarmed, while by 1400 Before Christ the climate became drier, and as a result this land could no longer support many people. It is difficult today to imagine these areas, particularly the uplands of Wiltshire and Dorset, as heavily peopled areas.

Yet the monuments remain. After 3000 Before Christ the chalkland people started building great circles of earth banks and ditches. Inside, they built wooden buildings and stone circles. These "henges", as they are called, were centres of religious, political and economic power. By far the most spectacular, both then and now, was Stonehenge, which was built in separate stages over a period of more than a thousand years. The precise purposes of Stonehenge remain a mystery, but during the second phase of building, after about 2400 Before Christ, huge bluestones were brought to the site from south Wales. This could only have been achieved because the political authority of the area surrounding Stonehenge was recognised over a very large area, indeed probably over the whole of the British Isles. The movement of these bluestones was an extremely important event, the story of which was passed on from generation to generation. Three thousand years later, these unwritten memories were recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of Britain, written in 1136.

Stonehenge was almost certainly a sort of capital, to which the chiefs of other groups came from all over Britain. Certainly, earth or stone henges were built in many parts of Britain, as far as the Orkney Islands north of Scotland, and as far south as Cornwall. They seem to have been copies of the great Stonehenge in the south. In Ireland the centre of prehistoric civilisation grew around the River Boyne and at Tara in Ulster. The importance of these places in folk memory far outlasted the builders of the monuments.

After 2400 Before Christ new groups of people arrived in southeast Britain from Europe. They were round-headed and strongly built, taller than Neolithic Britons. It is not known whether they invaded by armed force, or whether they were invited by Neolithic Britons because of their military or metal-working skills. Their influence was soon felt and, as a result, they became leaders of British society. Their arrival is marked by the first individual graves, furnished with pottery beakers, from which these people get their name: the “Beaker” people.

Why did people now decide to be buried separately and give up the old communal burial barrows? It is difficult to be certain, but it is thought that the old barrows were built partly to please the gods of the soil, in the hope that this would stop the chalk upland soil getting poorer. The Beaker people brought with them from Europe a new cereal, barley, which could grow almost anywhere. Perhaps they felt it was no longer necessary to please the gods of the chalk upland soil.

The Beaker people probably spoke an Indo-European language. They seem to have brought a single culture to the whole of Britain. They also brought skills to make bronze tools and these began to replace stone ones. But they accepted many of the old ways. Stonehenge remained the most important centre until 1300 Before Christ. The Beaker people’s richest graves were there, and they added a new circle of thirty stone columns, this time connected by stone lintels, or cross-pieces. British society continued to be centred on a number of henges across the countryside.

However, from about 1300 Before Christ onwards the henge civilisation seems to have become less important, and was overtaken by a new form of society in southern England, that of a settled farming class. At first this farming society developed in order to feed the people at the henges, but eventually it became more important and powerful as it grew richer. The new farmers grew wealthy because they learned to enrich the soil with natural waste materials so that it did not become poor and useless. This change probably happened at about the same time that the chalk uplands were becoming drier. Family villages and fortified enclosures appeared across the landscape, in lower-lying areas as well as on the chalk hills, and the old central control of Stonehenge and the other henges was lost.

From this time, too, power seems to have shifted to the Thames valley and southeast Britain. Except for short periods, political and economic power has remained in the southeast ever since. Hill-forts replaced henges as the centres of local power, and most of these were found in the southeast, suggesting that the land successfully supported more people here than elsewhere.

There was another reason for the shift of power eastwards. A number of better-designed bronze swords have been found in the Thames valley, suggesting that the local people had more advanced metalworking skills. Many of these swords have been found in river beds, almost certainly thrown in for religious reasons. This custom may be the origin of the story of the legendary King Arthur's sword, which was given to him from out of the water and which was thrown back into the water when he died.

The Celts.

Around 700 Before Christ, another group of people began to arrive. Many of them were tall, and had fair or red hair and blue eyes. These were the Celts, who probably came from central Europe or further east, from southern Russia, and had moved slowly westwards in earlier centuries. The Celts were technically advanced.

They knew how to work with iron and could make better weapons than the people who used bronze. It is possible that they drove many of the older inhabitants westwards into Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Celts began to control all the lowland areas of Britain, and were joined by new arrivals from the European mainland. They continued to arrive in one wave after another over the next seven hundred years.

The Celts are important in British history because they are the ancestors of many of the people in Highland Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Cornwall today. The Iberian people of Wales and Cornwall took on the new Celtic culture. Celtic languages, which have been continuously used in some areas since that time, are still spoken. The British today are often described as Anglo-Saxon. It would be better to call them Anglo-Celt.

Our knowledge of the Celts is slight. As with previous groups of settlers, we do not even know for certain whether the Celts invaded Britain or came peacefully as a result of the lively trade with Europe from about 750 Before Christ onwards. At first most of Celtic Britain seems to have developed in a generally similar way. But from about 500 Before Christ trade contact with Europe declined, and regional differences between northwest and southeast Britain increased. The Celts were organised into different tribes, and tribal chiefs were chosen from each family or tribe, sometimes as the result of fighting matches between individuals, and sometimes by election.

The last Celtic arrivals from Europe were the Belgic tribes. It was natural for them to settle in the southeast of Britain, probably pushing other Celtic tribes northwards as they did so. At any rate, when Julius Caesar briefly visited Britain in 55 Before Christ he saw that the Belgic tribes were different from the older inhabitants. "The interior is inhabited", he wrote, "by peoples who consider themselves indigenous, the coast by people who have crossed from Belgium. Nearly all of these still keep the names of the European tribes from which they came."

The Celtic tribes continued the same kind of agriculture as the Bronze Age people before them. But their use of iron technology and their introduction of more advanced ploughing methods made it possible for them to farm heavier soils. However, they continued to use, and build, hill-forts. The increase of these, particularly in the southeast, suggests that the Celts were highly successful farmers, growing enough food for a much larger population.

The hill-fort remained the centre for local groups. The insides of these hill-forts were filled with houses, and they became the simple economic capitals and smaller "towns" of the different tribal areas into which Britain was now divided. Today the empty hill-forts stand on lonely hilltops. Yet they remained local economic centres long after the Romans came to Britain, and long after they went.

Within living memory certain annual fairs were associated with hill-forts. For example, there was an annual September fair on the site of a Dorset hill-fort, which was used by the writer Thomas Hardy in his novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, published in 1874.

The Celts traded across tribal borders and trade was probably important for political and social contact between the tribes. Trade with Ireland went through the island of Anglesey. The two main trade outlets eastwards to Europe were the settlements along the Thames River in the south and on the Firth of Forth in the north. It is no accident that the present-day capitals of England and Scotland stand on or near these two ancient trade centres. Much trade, both inside and beyond Britain, was conducted by river and sea. For money the Celts used iron bars, until they began to copy the Roman coins they saw used in Gaul (France).

According to the Romans, the Celtic men wore shirts and breeches (knee-length trousers), and striped or checked cloaks fastened by a pin. It is possible that the Scottish tartan and dress developed from this "striped cloak". The Celts were also "very careful about cleanliness and neatness", as one Roman wrote. "Neither man nor woman," he went on, "however poor, was seen either ragged or dirty."

The Celtic tribes were ruled over by a warrior class, of which the priests, or Druids, seem to have been particularly important members. These Druids could not read or write, but they memorised all the religious teachings, the tribal laws, history, medicine and other knowledge necessary in Celtic society. The Druids from different tribes all over Britain probably met once a year. They had no temples, but they met in sacred groves of trees, on certain hills, by rivers or by river sources. We know little of their kind of worship except that at times it included human sacrifice.

During the Celtic period women may have had more independence than they had again for hundreds of years. When the Romans invaded Britain two of the largest tribes were ruled by women who fought from their chariots. The most powerful Celt to stand up to the Romans was a woman, Boadicea. She had become queen of her tribe when her husband had died. She was tall, with long red hair, and had a frightening appearance. In Anno Domini 61 she led her tribe against the Romans. She nearly drove them from Britain, and she destroyed London, the Roman capital, before she was defeated and killed. Roman writers commented on the courage and strength of women in battle, and leave an impression of a measure of equality between the sexes among the richer Celts.

The Romans.

The name "Britain" comes from the word "Pretani", the Greco-Roman word for the inhabitants of Britain. The Romans mispronounced the word and called the island "Britannia".

The Romans had invaded because the Celts of Britain were working with the Celts of Gaul against them. The British Celts were giving them food, and allowing them to hide in Britain. There was another reason. The Celts used cattle to pull their ploughs and this meant that richer, heavier land could be farmed. Under the Celts Britain had become an important food producer because of its mild climate. It now exported corn and animals, as well as hunting dogs and slaves, to the European mainland. The Romans could make use of British food for their own army fighting the Gauls.

The Romans brought the skills of reading and writing to Britain. The written word was important for spreading ideas and also for establishing power. As early as Anno Domini 80, as one Roman at the time noted, the governor Agricola "trained the sons of chiefs in the liberal arts ... the result was that the people who used to reject Latin began to use it in speech and writing. Further the wearing of our national dress came to be valued and the toga [the Roman cloak] came into fashion." While the Celtic peasantry remained illiterate and only Celtic- speaking, a number of town dwellers spoke Latin and Greek with ease, and the richer

landowners in the country almost certainly used Latin, But Latin completely disappeared both in its spoken and written forms when the Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain in the fifth century Anno Domini.

Britain was probably more literate under the Romans than it was to be again until the fifteenth century.

Julius Caesar first came to Britain in 55 Before Christ, but it was not until almost a century later, in Anno Domini 43, that a Roman army actually occupied Britain. The Romans were determined to conquer the whole island. They had little difficulty, apart from Boadicea's revolt, because they had a better trained army and because the Celtic tribes fought among themselves. The Romans considered the Celts as war-mad, "high spirited and quick for battle", a description some would still give the Scots, Irish and Welsh today.

The Romans established a Romano-British culture across the southern half of Britain, from the River Humber to the River Severn. This part of Britain was inside the empire. Beyond were the upland areas, under Roman control but not developed. These areas were watched from the towns of York, Chester and Caerleon in the western peninsula of Britain that later became known as Wales. Each of these towns was held by a Roman legion of about 7000 men. The total Roman army in Britain was about 40000 men.

The Romans could not conquer "Caledonia", as they called Scotland, although they spent over a century trying to do so. At last they built a strong wall along the northern border, named after the Emperor Hadrian who planned it. At the time, Hadrian's wall was simply intended to keep out raiders from the north. But it also marked the border between the two later countries, England and Scotland. Eventually, the border was established a few miles further north. Efforts to change it in later centuries did not succeed, mainly because on either side of the border an invading army found its supply line overstretched. A natural point of balance had been found.

Roman control of Britain came to an end as the empire began to collapse. The first signs were the attacks by Celts of Caledonia in Anno Domini 367. The Roman legions found it more and more difficult to stop the raiders from crossing Hadrian's wall. The same was happening on the European mainland as Germanic groups, Saxons and Franks, began to raid the coast of Gaul. In Anno Domini 409 Rome pulled its last soldiers out of Britain and the Romano-British, the Romanised Celts, were left to fight alone against the Scots, the Irish and Saxon raiders from Germany. The following year Rome itself fell to raiders. When Britain called to Rome for help against the raiders from Saxon Germany in the mid-fifth century, no answer came.

Roman life.

The most obvious characteristic of Roman Britain was its towns, which were the basis of Roman administration and civilisation. Many grew out of Celtic settlements, military camps or market centres. Broadly, there were three different kinds of town in Roman Britain, two of which were towns established by Roman charter. These were the *coloniae*, towns peopled by Roman settlers, and the *municipia*, large cities in which the whole population was given Roman citizenship. The third kind, the *civitas*, included the old Celtic tribal capitals, through which the Romans administered the Celtic population in the countryside. At first these towns had no walls. Then, probably from the end of the second century to the end of the third century Anno Domini, almost every town was given walls. At first many of these were no more than earthworks, but by Anno Domini 300 all towns had thick stone walls.

The Romans left about twenty large towns of about 5000 inhabitants, and almost one hundred smaller ones. Many of these towns were at first army camps, and the Latin word for camp, *castra*, has remained part of many town names to this day (with the ending *chester*, *caster* or *cester*): Gloucester, Leicester, Doncaster, Winchester, Chester, Lancaster and many others besides. These towns were built with stone as well as wood, and had planned streets, markets and shops. Some buildings had central heating. They were connected by roads which were so well built that they survived when later roads broke up. These roads continued to be used long after the Romans left, and became the main roads of modern Britain. Six of these Roman roads met in London, a capital city of about 20000 people.

London was twice the size of Paris, and possibly the most important trading centre of northern Europe, because southeast Britain produced so much corn for export.

Outside the towns, the biggest change during the Roman occupation was the growth of large farms, called “*villas*”. These belonged to the richer Britons who were, like the townspeople, more Roman than Celt in their manners. Each villa had many workers. The villas were usually close to towns so that the crops could be sold easily. There was a growing difference between the rich and those who did the actual work on the land. These, and most people, still lived in the same kind of round huts and villages which the Celts had been living in four hundred years earlier, when the Romans arrived.

In some ways life in Roman Britain seems very civilised, but it was also hard for all except the richest. The bodies buried in a Roman graveyard at York show that life expectancy was low. Half the entire population died between the ages of twenty and forty, while 15 per cent died before reaching the age of twenty.



It is very difficult to be sure how many people were living in Britain when the Romans left. Probably it was as many as five million, partly because of the peace and the increased economic life which the Romans had brought to the country. The new wave of invaders changed all that.